Boeing Conducts Successful First Flight of Australia's 737 Airborne Early Warning & Control Aircraft

A new era in airborne surveillance and command and control began today with the successful first flight of the Boeing [NYSE: BA] 737 airborne early warning and control, or AEW&C aircraft for Australia's Project Wedgetail.

The plane rolled down the runway at Boeing Field in Seattle and took to the skies at 10:15 a.m. PDT, heading west to the Pacific Ocean. It then flew back and forth over Washington State's Olympic Peninsula before landing at Boeing Field.

During the two-hour flight Boeing pilot Charles Gebhardt and co-pilot Ray Craig conducted a series of tests on the airplane's systems and structures. The pilots were in constant contact with a group of test engineers monitoring the flight at Boeing Field.

After touchdown, the aircraft was greeted by Air Vice Marshall Norm Gray, head of Australia's Airborne Surveillance and Control division and Allen Ashby, vice president and general manager of Boeing Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Systems.

"The plane handled beautifully, just like a 737-700. It was very similar to our experience in the flight simulator. There weren't any surprises," said Gebhardt.

"First flight is the beginning of a comprehensive FAA air worthiness certification program for the 737 AEW&C aircraft. It also continues the Boeing-led industry team's flawless execution in meeting our customer's milestones," said Patrick Gill, Boeing vice president of 737 AEW&C programs.

Flight testing is scheduled to run through mid-December.

"Achieving first flight eight days ahead of schedule is testimony to the hard work, energy and experience of the Boeing team in Seattle. It also shows what can be achieved through the Boeing and Commonwealth teams operating in partnership," said Air Vice Marshal Norm Gray, head of Australia's Airborne Surveillance and Control division.

In 2000, Boeing signed a $1 billion - plus contract with the Commonwealth of Australia for four 737-700 aircraft and six AEW&C systems with options to purchase additional aircraft. Those options were recently exercised for two 737-700 aircraft. The value of the options is approximately $180 million.

The contract also provides for ground-based support segments for flight and mission crew training, a mission support segment and other system support facilities and spare parts.

Delivery of the first two aircraft is scheduled for 2006. The other four aircraft will be delivered by 2008.

Boeing also is on contract for Turkey's Peace Eagle program. It includes four 737 AEW&C aircraft plus ground support segments for mission crew training, mission support and system maintenance support. Delivery of the first two 737 AEW&C aircraft is scheduled for 2007.

The 737 AEW&C system features the Next Generation 737-700 increased gross weight aircraft and Northrop Grumman's multi-role electronically scanned array antenna with integrated friend or foe identification capabilities. It also includes a flexible open architecture for cost-effective future upgrades, an extensive communications suite, aerial refueling capability and an electronic warfare self-protection subsystem.

A unit of The Boeing Company, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is one of the world's largest space and defense businesses. Headquartered in St. Louis, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is a $27 billion business. It provides systems solutions to its global military, government and commercial customers. It is a leading provider of intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance; the world's largest military aircraft manufacturer; the world's largest satellite manufacturer and a leading provider of space-base communications; the primary systems integrator for U.S. missile defense; NASA's largest contractor; and a global leader in launch services.

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